From the Earth Native's Point of View: The Earth, the Extraterrestrial, and the Natural Ground of Home

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Say that the self emerges through its processes of orientation towards the world.[1] And say, too, that the self is felt in its moments of disorientation, when the imagined spaces it inhabits—spaces as vast as the earth and as intimate as the body—veer suddenly into strangeness, perceived at once from the inside, and from the objectifying vision of beyond. As likely as not, these days in

I did the research for this essay in Austin, Texas, primarily from 1992 through 1994, with follow-up through 1995. Research included biweekly participation in the UFO abductee support group (where attendance was predicated on belief in and sympathy for many kinds of anomalous experiences) engagement in social relationships and events arising from support group associations; and formal interviews with UFO experiencers, who were both members and nonmembers of the group. I have changed names and certain identifying details to protect privacy. From spring 1992 through 1993, I also attended meetings of Austin MUFON (Mutual UFO Network, Inc., an international, "science"-oriented, investigative UFO organization, whose local chapter spawned the more "experience"-oriented abductee group). Although there was some overlap between members of MUFON and the support group, the latter group is far more relevant to the kind of talk presented here. Much of this discourse has a deep connection to the vast and rapidly growing volume of popular UFO books read and discussed by many UFO experiencers. The drive towards meaningfulness here takes the route of an urgent, continual reading and retelling of other stories. Published UFO theories and narratives are of course internalized, fused with experience and with other resonant social narratives, and recirculated in mimetic and exegetical talk that is always double-voiced (Bakhtin 1986). Some of the most popular books discussed in the abductee group included Hopkins (1981, 1987), Streiber (1987), Bramley (1990), Mack (1994), and Jacobs (1992).

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1. This idea is developed theoretically and ethnographically by Csordas (1994), also in relation to experiences with phenomenological otherness.

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America, such vertigo comes with a UFO. In much UFO discourse, the self is not theorized as a totalized entity but is glimpsed through elaborations of the spaces which alternately anchor and confuse it.

Here, in stories and dreams, the earth is poeticized as the ground of the ordinary self. It is a "natural" ground which, in the disorienting realm of the unnatural, is said to be plundered and lost. And from within this flux, a theory of the human rises up as ambivalently wedded to dual figures of the hometown and the natural earth—with "the natural" itself a sign, one felt to be slipping away.[2]

How then do contemporary myths imagine the natural world, and poeticize the uncultivated earth? In the rationalized landscapes of America, nature is not necessarily poeticized through stories of specific emplacements, embodiments or memories. Instead, nature is spoken of as a site of nostalgia, a lost home, where embodiment and memory are achingly present only in their absence. Postmodern storying of the world might not feature iconic reproductions of local bird songs, as Feld (1990) has described for the Kaluli; postmodern myths might not help people think through the humanized exploits of the local animals they encounter, as Levi-Strauss (1969) found with the Bororo. This landscape is not filled with storied mountains overwritten with memories and morals, as is the Apache landscape Basso (1984) described. People pass through the grid of the postmodern landscape; storied nature, families and roots are elsewhere. Or, perhaps, they're nowhere. What's left is a longing for a more "real" place, a more "natural" home.

What would it mean to stake out a storied home in the realm of the not-at-home? To make one's bed in the "unhomely": the *unheimlich*, the uncanny, a space both familiar and strange, at once as densely naturalized as one's home ground, and as alien as that same ground appears when its hidden gaps begin to show (Freud 1963[1919])?[3]

For years I have listened to talk of longing for and loss of a grounding home, embedded in stories of the earth and the extraterrestrial. The earth is a trope that is cathected in all mythologies of the postmodern world, but heightened in stories

2. My ethnographic desire here is to open the potential for immersion in a specific structure of imagination, whose densely layered, intertextual poetics is inseparable from its epistemology. UFO discourse presents a constant slippage between theory and image, between abstraction and story. In its processes of poetic intensification, various texts—oral and written, solid and ephemeral—become irreducibly entangled. In my own tracking of this poetic, I similarly move between theoretical distance and mimetic closeness; the voices performed are both independent of me, and thoroughly saturated by my hearing. Following Stewart, my own style here "at times . . . performs a sharp disjuncture between discourses—mine and theirs . . . [while] at other times it attempts a hybridization" (1996: 40).

3. Similarly, Ivy (1995) points out that the yearned for, nostalgic rural "homeland" became a marker of the *unheimlich* in Japan as it was repressed by the forces of modernity.

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of UFOs. The sites of the stories here are the "abductee support group" gatherings in Austin, Texas, where people get together to tell their encounters with "all the weird stuff" that haunts and worries the real.

The Austin, Texas abductee support group began in August 1992 when Betty, a veteran of the support group structure from Alcoholics Anonymous, put an ad in the local paper calling for UFO experiencers. Over sixty people showed up to sit on folding chairs and tell true stories whose centers would not hold still. After a few weeks, a core of about fifteen regulars remained; in shifting configurations they came every other week, and then more often, getting together on weekends, at each other's homes, soon marking the group as a major source of sociality by having UFO parties at Christmastime and on New Year's Eve, or camping out, on summer nights, in the field behind Bear and Jimbo's place, to talk all night and search the skies for UFOs.

Jimbo and Bear are best friends who live on the working-class edge of town; their yard is filled with skittish skinny cats, but in the bedroom there are displays of dozens of perfect little models Bear has made: heroes from fantasy worlds arranged on wristwatch-display cases that he gleaned from some old job. Bear is a big, big guy, a dump truck driver with a graying ponytail; and there's a shiny smooth spot where his thumb should be, following a factory accident—they still haven't paid him what they owe him for that thumb. Bear finds himself sleepdriving. He fell asleep on the couch watching *Unsolved Mysteries*, and the next thing he knows he's driving through a park where he would never even *go* to. Now he sleeps with rings on all the fingers of one hand, because when he does that, nothing happens; but one night, he woke up and *something* had taken off all his rings, laid them right there neat in a row on the pillow. He's not saying anything, but *something* got those rings off. It must be the UFOs again.

But Bear thinks they're really after Jimbo.

Jimbo's short and compact with a tough walk; he's angry and smart, an excellent musician and a pro cook at a Bar-B-Q place. He shows a school snapshot of a teenage daughter; she lives with her mom, back home. Jimbo had his troubles in childhood like anyone else. Local people called him half-breed on account of his Filipino father who left when he was two. And the Freudians say *anything that happens* it's on account of your childhood, *your mother this, your mother that.* But this UFO stuff is not because of some childhood thing. Jimbo has seen things, felt things, and they were real. He says *if something happened, damn it, it happened.* Grew up real *strict* religious, but *UFO stuff* always happened to him—even when he was two years old they reached their long arms into the backseat of the car to grab at him.

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Jimbo and Bear tell us their story together, taking turns, again and again, over months of time: how Bear woke up in the middle of the night hearing Jimbo call his name; and when Bear ran in to help him, he slammed into a force field. No way to explain it but a force field. Bear could see a terrible black shape hanging over Jimbo, trying to suffocate him, and Jimbo was screaming "Bear, Bear." Next thing Bear knew something put him flat back in that bed. So the next day he thought it was a dream; but Jimbo'd had the same dream. No, that sure wasn't a dream. That was real.

Madeline says that aliens come into her room, every night; she can't sleep. Her husband won't listen to her. But the other night he screamed, "Don't take her, leave her alone!" and she awoke paralyzed to see a monstrous black shape above her, her husband swinging wildly at it. Next thing she knew it was morning, but *he won't discuss this nonsense.*

Anna is blind; she comes with her seeing-eye dog. She remembers things she used to be able to see, things she used to love: a rock she held in her hands, and it was so pretty, it felt like something magic. She doesn't talk much about herself but one day she abruptly says:

I have been taken to a planet with three moons.
I have been taken to Israel,
I have been taken to Paris.

These weren't dreams, because when she dreams she cannot see. She thinks of times when otherness surrounded her: *These people I met on the beach, I think they were aliens. They said they were from Jerusalem and told me to change my life.* But nothing's happened in so long, and she feels so sad, *missing them.*

Through stories, braided with laughter and small talk, these friends tell of free-falling into the uncanny, out of the natural sites that should root you in ordinary time and space. These selves recognize and bolster each other. Outsiders try to pin down your open-ended self. They call you crazy, they say you're on drugs. "They go, what have you been drinkin' or smokin'?" "Yeah," says Joanne, "like I was smoking or drinking when I was six years old"—that's when the creatures started coming around to surround her sleeping body. "Well," says Carla, "no one calls you crazy here. The weird stuff is real—whatever the hell that means!" Here the real is a shifting sign, constantly produced and dismantled; it can never be pinned down or summed up. And so the familiar self-help genre of the support group becomes a place to confess not what you've done, but rather what you've seen; what you dream, and what you remember; what "weird stuff" just happens in the open, contingent world.

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So this is how you narrate your altered self: by performing it on the seesaw of the real. You tell stories that force deferral of any quick judgment about what the real might be, stories whose own fantastic rhetoric dismantles narrative conventions of realism and replaces them with irreducible uncertainty (Todorov 1975). At the same time, the emotional force of these stories demands the listener attend to it with the same openness she would bring to the genres of ordinary personal narrative. The uncanny story creates a place where the referent might not precede the sign, where "narrative experience" (Steedly 1993) outruns ethnographic evidence, where "lives are told and stories lived" (p. 15).

Here people speak with awe of seeing UFOs: silver discs hovering over power lines, or vast crafts oozing liquid light over the whole stretch of visible sky, or strange lights on the horizon making unnatural turns. Just little lights that open the sky into vertigo. They tell of encounters with strange beings who trespass the natural world and transgress the boundaries of human bodies: angelic figures in flowing robes or vaguely satanic men-in-black, tricksterlike reptilians, and sometimes, the ones who've made all the press these days, the little grays with big black insect eyes, who steal silently through the night to perform inscrutable medical operations on helpless abductees.

These beings, people say, might come from some other planet or galaxy. But probably they come from some other dimension or time. In fact, some say, the aliens are *us*, returning from the wasteland of our own hypertechnological future, turning back time to this moment at the end of the twentieth century, when "the natural" really started to collapse. Maybe the aliens are trying to warn us: some people are taken on UFOs and shown images of the world in nuclear destruction, the mushroom clouds rising, the cities falling. Or maybe the aliens are just trying to save themselves: nothing but high-tech forms, they've lost the spark of humanity and covet our emotion—our naturalness. Now they're coming back to harvest the human nature they've lost. They're fascinated by the natural differences between humans, they chart the embodied traces left by our biographies, our weight gains, our hair losses, our scars. They steal your eggs and sperm, create hybrid creatures of alien and human, all to put some robust blood into their unnatural alien stock.

Christina tells about her pale hybrid daughter, who comes around in silent visitations—she gazes in the window, returning and returning to look for Christina, the warm human mother who gave birth to her in a cold UFO. Christina says she's starting to remember her abduction now, recalling more of its terror and fog; and the aliens are watching her all the time. Their omniscient gaze defies natural rootedness. Those aliens put their seed in your womb and tracers in your

brain, stick it right up your nose with a terrible needle; and when you wake up, your nose is bloody and your nightmares are fierce, and they make you forget it ever happened. "It's like when *human* scientists tag animals to study them." Anna says, "the animals don't know what's going on either."

In this unnatural realm, humans become the animals they ordinarily tag, observed by clinical alien eyes. The classic opposition between cultural humans and natural animals is recast here, with human subjectivity associated *not* with culture but with nature.[4] The imagined earth is rehumanized as our natural home, as humans are linked to nature and to animals, while aliens are linked to a technological hyper-Culture which subjugates and experiments on human animals. Instead of the mythos which tells us we were once animals (Fernandez 1986), a structure echoed in the Darwinian narrative of evolution (Landau 1991), the UFO story takes us to a new point in an evolutionary myth. Here, we see that we are *currently* animals, while the potential human self—the overly technological alien—descends from its future position and collapses the future (not the past) into the present. And this future-present is thoroughly infiltrated by the disorienting moves of "inhuman" technology.

From the earth-native's point of view, then, the subjective human being is linked to lab animals and the torn-up earth and the medicalized sexuality of bodies. Whether the aliens are storied as benevolent guardians warning us of our own technology spinning out of control, or as sinister high-tech thieves of human selves, these are stories of a too-present realm of the unnatural, urgently erupting into the anti-natural zones of postmodernity to point—nostalgically—to the eclipse of nature.[5]

4. The opposition between animals and humans has long been seen as a fundamental process of metaphor in the semiotic construction of human identity, marking animal nature from human culture; children learn to become human subjects by identifying with, and then mastering, animals (Fernandez 1986). This point is suggestive here, for like animals, space aliens are both like and unlike humans. They are at once similar enough to compare, and different enough to provoke theorizations of what it means to be human in opposition. On one level, of course, the "origin" of the subject/object relation between humans and aliens does not occupy the same metaphoric position as that between humans and animals; since aliens never reside in the everyday world, but are, from the first point of encounter, inscribed only in uncanny sites which juxtapose and mark the everyday. However, as Urban (1991) writes, the animals of myth also live in the sensual world only through discourse.

5. In a related figure of invaded subjectivity too densely elaborated in UFO discourse to describe in detail here, abductees also identify themselves with subjects of historical colonialism, especially Native Americans. Roth (1995) describes this as a "reverse colonial fantasy" that mythically reproduces essentialist discourses of race. White (1994), however, sees the hybridization theme in alien stories as specifically anti-essentialist. The point for my discussion is that aspects of many naturalized social narratives of invasion are condensed, overlapped and combined here into an intensified, irreducible narrative with open-ended points of identification.

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But nostalgia is a longing which has no definite object. Nostalgia is immanently written into the unbridgeable split between signifier and referent, which in capitalism and modernity, produces a poignant ache for the always-already disappeared (K. Stewart 1988; S. Stewart 1993). In UFO stories, nostalgia saturates the natural earth, an index to the vanished realm of an uncontested "real."

"It's happening too fast," Janet says. The earth is veering on its own axis, overcome by trash, by pollution and the weight of nuclear bombs awaiting the day of flight in their awful secret nests. Look at all the signs: earthquakes, fires, storms and floods. Gaia's gearing up for the big one. The earth is mouthing off. Now the earth itself is storied as a subject, a feeling body violated both by aliens and high-tech humans. Again, the spoken feelings of displacement and loss are not limited to longing for one's specific childhood hometown, but for the earth itself, encoded with nostalgia as people feel it vanishing.

The alien-invaded earth, like the body of a disembodied soul, or like the remembered hometown of a dislocated suburban wanderer, is both longed for and despised. Images of the earth and the childhood hometown are often metaphorically laden with both the pleasurable intensity and the bad aftertaste of exile. Between tales of abduction and stories of strange balls of light or of creatures running an electric wand over your paralyzed body until the vibrations penetrate your skin and you almost die of fright, we talk, sometimes, of earthly life. Then the hometown is spoken of as the place of remembered child abuse, narrow-minded meanness, dead-end shit jobs, Bible-thumper relatives who make you kneel down and renounce what you know, the debris of too much closeness and desire in the ruins of modernity. But it's also spoken of as the place of remembered rootedness, prayer, order and attachment, and drenched with longing for the namedness of place. The image of the ordinary earthly becomes an unmarked "real," the stable foundation of the known, set against the vertigo of the bizarre. The fantastic bleeds into the ordinary, infusing earthly life with open-ended desire.

At the same time, the ordinary frames and limits the fantastic with the specificity of habitus. At parties for the support group, we watch UFO videos at Trudy's brightly colored house, down past the Target store, where working-class subdivisions have names like Sir Gawain Place and King Arthur Court. Everything's neat as a pin despite three kids, with Trudy working full-time now, swing shift at the local microchip complex. Her little girls run crazy through the house as Trudy talks over the video to tell her deepest stories: how blue aliens appeared by her bedside, made her pregnant and then stole the fetus; she had a hysterectomy last year, on account of her diabetes, and she dreamed they'd find a golden

baby when they opened her up; but then, nothing was there. She fills our cups with soda in the living room decorated with big portraits of *Star Trek's* Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk, with a parrot in a cage by the TV screaming *Beam me up, Beam me up.*

At one meeting, Carla tells us about her encounter, and the details of her childhood pile up as proof of real memory. Even as those details pulse with the solid presence of their own unquestionable reality, they also acquire the patina of a highly textualized nostalgia. The ordinary, here, becomes the sign of the natural, the unbroken orientation in which the self can emerge on solid ground, as she says:

> What tells me it was not a dream
> is the *level of detail*
>
> I remember waking up when I was nine years old and it was raining . . .
> and there was this
> *thing*
> looking in the window at me
> and it wasn't a person
> and it wasn't an animal
> and I still can't remember that face
> but I can remember the level of detail
> I can remember the quilt on my bed
> what the quilt looked like
> it was a wedding ring quilt
> that my—it was a friendship quilt that my mother—
> We lived out on a farm in Oklahoma
> and this was back in the early forties
> and all the women would embroider their names
> and they'd all trade pieces
> and they'd all have these friendship quilts . . .
> I can remember the white cloth with the embroidered names
> and the other colors set in
> I can remember where the window was
> I remember there was no curt—[ain]
> I remember the wash—sewing machine at the foot of my bed
> with material folded up on top
> I can remember that whole thing
> my sister's bed over here
> and I cannot remember that face.

Those eyes that were holding me on that bed
I mean
hypnotizing me
I *could not* move
I was absolutely
powerless to move.

The loving details of the ordinary homely world—the remembered quilt with its layers of human history, the sewing machine with its evocation of domestic work—all point to an indisputable reality, the ground of an oriented subjectivity interrupted by the unknown. But in other stories, Carla told us how that homely place wounded her; how she suffered in the meanest poverty, and endured cruelty by adults, a rape that no one believed, and how there, amid the quilts and sewing machines, she just knew that there had to be *more.*

She told me how much she hated her childhood hometown. But she told me this as we sat in her living room filled with dozens of pictures of that place, a black-and-white mother, house and land, all framed in a huge collage on the wall. And then the next year, Carla abruptly moved back to that tiny Oklahoma town, returning to the place she said she'd never forgive, thirty years after she escaped with the first of her many husbands. Everyone she had known from the past was now dead or gone, but she found herself a little house and settled in and tried to grow a garden. Tried to make it work again. But the winter was fierce, and the neighbors did not speak to her, and when she tried to start a UFO group, *something's telling me this is what I'm supposed to be doing here*, hardly anyone showed up. They made her feel crazy and lost. She lay down in her freezing house, and just gave up until one of her old Alcoholics Anonymous friends flew out there to that middle of nowhere, rented a U-Haul, threw Carla's stuff inside and just drove her back to Texas again, where childhood pictures can be returned to a collage on the wall.

The home is a place to escape from, but in stories of the bizarre it is framed, and renarrated as the original, the natural, the real. Like the ordinary, it is a space of ambivalence. And so too is the planet earth.

People say: I wasn't born to be on this earth. I knew all along that I was different. The people here are narrow-minded, mean; they make me feel crazy and judged. The only time I felt like I belonged in church, Carla often says, was when they sang a hymn that went, "The earth is not my home, I'm just passing through." *I sang that one all right! I could relate to that!* Margaret, at another meeting, says she knows she is just not from "here"; she doesn't know *where* she's from

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but she just knew since she was a young girl it wasn't this small-minded, mean little earth. She used to be an alcoholic, but one day, as she was dying on the bathroom floor, a beautiful being from some other world appeared; she never drank again. One day as we're looking at clothes in a thrift shop—the only kind of clothes she likes—she mentions child abuse back home. Margaret is fragile and skinny, in her forties, with the harsh terrain of her life mapped onto her face; when she speaks, her vowels are still as flat as prairies, but she left Nebraska a long time ago and won't go back. She cries out during the meeting: "I hate earth food and I hate earth clothes, where am I from?"

"Walk-ins" from other planets occupy some human bodies, colonizing the self with half-remembered longings for another place, so maybe that's it; or maybe we're just earth-misfits, or, in moments of excitement, the vanguard of a new evolving breed, mutating with the fast-changing world. In essence, then, here is the dark side of Donna Haraway's cyborg (1991), moving simultaneously towards triumph and destruction, and pointing to a future of terrifying surfaces where "the natural" lingers only in always receding, already remembered, traces of "before."

But at the same time, in UFO stories, the planet earth is still imagined as an orienting place, a hyperstoried human hometown of memory, embodiment, nostalgia and desire. The earth is our naturally rightful home invaded by space aliens, who, like gentrifiers of the cosmos, let us see through their alienated eyes both its desired beauty and its small, rough, overemotional backwardness. Thanks to NASA, we can see the earth from the outside now. And its image still startles, still demands attention, doesn't it, like the image of one's own body in an out-of-body experience, so shockingly small and solitary and beautiful and unrelated to the ground you're standing on.

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